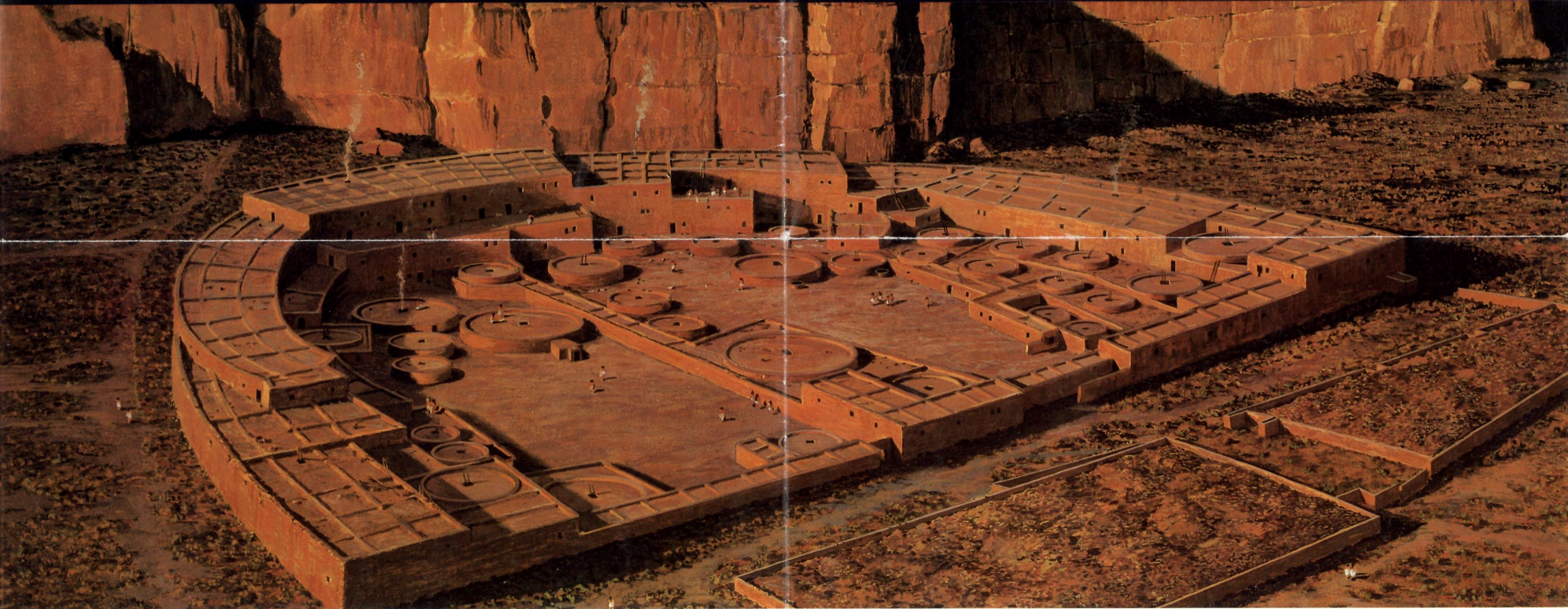


Chaco Culture

Chaco Culture
National Historical Park
New Mexico

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Pueblo Bonito was the largest town in the Chacoan system. This painting by L. Kenneth Townsend is a well-researched though still hypothetical view of the great house in the early 1100s, when it stood four stories high and contained hundreds of rooms and dozens of kivas.

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A Center of Anasazi Culture

Chaco Canyon, for all its wild beauty, seems an unlikely place for the Anasazi culture to take root and flourish. This is desert country, with long winters, short growing seasons, and marginal rainfall. Yet a thousand years ago, this valley was a center of Anasazi life. These people farmed the lowlands and built great masonry towns that connected with other towns over a wide-ranging network of roads. In architecture, in complexity of community life, in social organization, the master builders of Chaco Canyon reached heights rarely matched by their kindred in the Four Corners region.

The cultural flowering of the Chaco Anasazi began in the mid-800s AD. We see it clearly in the architecture. They started building on a much larger scale. Using the same masonry techniques as before—walls one stone thick with generous use of mud mortar—they built stone villages of multiple stories with rooms several

times larger than in the previous stage of their culture. Within a century six large pueblos—Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, Una Vida, Peñasco Blanco, Hungo Pavi, and Kin Bineola—were underway. This pattern of a single large pueblo with oversized rooms, surrounded by conventional villages, caught on throughout the region. New communities built along these lines sprang up. Old villages built similarly large pueblos. Eventually there were more than 75 of these “towns,” most of them closely tied to Chaco by an extensive system of roads.

By AD 1000 or so Chaco was well on the way to becoming the economic center of the San Juan Basin. There may have been as many as 5,000 persons living in some 400 settlements in and around Chaco or as few as 2,000, depending on which assumptions are used to estimate population. A new masonry technique—the use of masonry walls with rubble cores and outer surfaces of

shaped stones—allowed walls to rise more than four stories in height. The large buildings show signs of being planned from the start, in contrast to the usual Anasazi practice of adding rooms as needed.

How to account for this social complexity? One theory is that Chaco emerged as a dominant regional center in response to environmental change. The vagaries of weather made farming chancy. One year might be wet, another dry; one growing season long, another short. To hedge their economy, Chacoans began to specialize in processing turquoise and beads into ornaments and jewelry. Thus Chaco became the hub of a trading network, drawing in goods and commodities and influencing affairs over a wide area. Traffic in turquoise may well have helped Chaco develop into a center for ritual and ceremony, journeys becoming pilgrimages. Such a combination might ex-

plain the stunning architectural development here during the 11th century.

The decline of Chaco after a century and a half of success coincided with drought in the San Juan Basin. There was a brief but severe drought between 1090 and 1100 and a prolonged one between 1130 and 1180. The last tree-ring date is 1132. By mid-century little or no use was being made of the buildings. What happened? Where did the Chacoans go? One thought is that there was a fundamental shift in Chacoan culture after about 1115. New masonry styles appear, evidence perhaps of new people. Ritual may have counted for less; Chaco perhaps became less dominant within the region. In time, the people drifted away to more favorable places within the region. Their descendants still live among the Pueblo people today.

Clues to the Past

The Road System

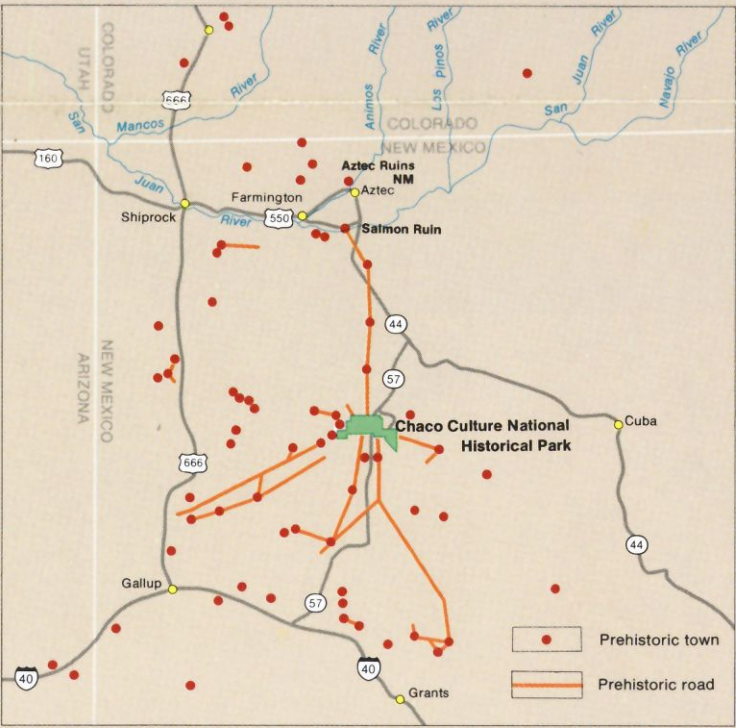
The extensive Chacoan road system is impressive. More than 400 miles of prehistoric roadway have been identified. This system connected Chaco to outlying communities and resource areas. It also provided connections between outlying communities. Some segments appear to lack a destination at all. One of the longest identifiable segments of road headed north, leading to the prehistoric communities of Salmon and Aztec.

These roads were not simple trails worn by centuries of foot travel. The roads and road features were engineered and planned, and represent a significant amount of labor investment in their construction and maintenance. Their function may have been more than utilitarian. There is a growing consensus among archaeologists that the road features may directly reflect the pueblo world view.

The most elaborate road construction occurs

around great houses where double and quadruple road segments have been found. These segments have no apparent function and may relate to ritual and ceremony. The prehistoric road system facilitated communication between communities and assisted in the transportation of goods. It also provided a means for bringing the culture together through its relation to the social organization and cosmography of these ancient people.

Chaco and Its Principal Outliers ▶



Trade

During Classic times, Chaco was the center of a far-flung trading network. Goods were exchanged internally within the Chacoan system and externally with groups as far south as Mexico. Chaco's distinctive Cibola black-on-white pottery (seen at right) may have originated in outlying towns to the south and west. One estimate is that only about 20 percent of the pottery used here was made here. This may have been because there was better clay in other villages and more wood available for firing the vessels.

What Chaco lacked in pottery it more than made up for in turquoise ornaments. Raw turquoise was imported from distant mines and transformed with exquisite craftsmanship into necklaces, bracelets, and pendants. Great quantities of such jewelry have been found here, more than at any other southwestern site. This small frog (right) carved in jet, found in

Pueblo Bonito, has eyes and a collar of turquoise.

Other evidence of the trading system includes the many seashells (of ten strung into necklaces), copper bells, and remains of macaws or parrots found here. The two latter items suggest contact with Mexico, perhaps with the ancient Toltecs.



American Museum of Natural History

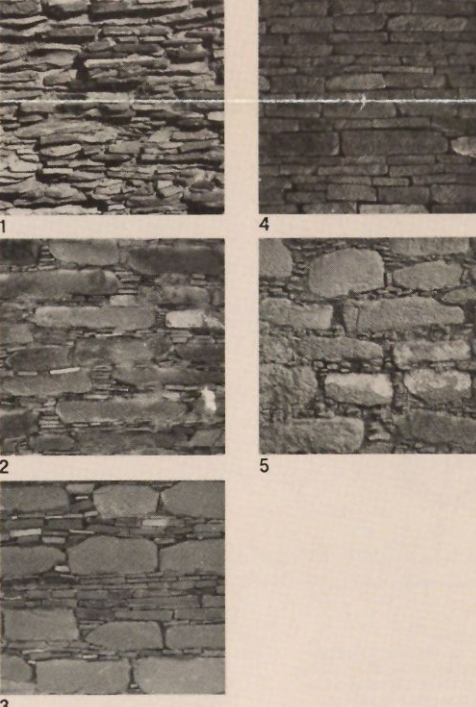
Masonry

The Chaco Anasazi were skilled masons. Working without metal tools, they put up vast communal buildings that still compel admiration. Their methods evolved over centuries. The earliest dwellings were constructed with simple walls one stone thick, with generous courses of mud mortar. The oldest walls in Pueblo Bonito used this type of masonry (1). When the Chacoans began to build higher and more extensively, they employed walls with thick inner cores of rubble and fairly thin veneers of facing

stone. These walls tapered as they rose, evidence of the planning that went into the large-scale construction in Classic times (AD 1020-1120). An early example of this wall (2) is characterized by large blocks of tabular sandstone chinked with smaller stones set in mortar.

About half the ground floor of Pueblo Bonito was built in masonry styles 3 and 4 (late 11th century). These styles were employed at roughly the same time. Though the patterns are attractive as they stand, there is evidence the Chacoans covered most of the stonework with plaster.

The last distinctive masonry style, called McElmo (5), appears in Kin Kletso and in other early 1100s architecture. Kin Kletso's walls were built with a thin inner core of rubble and thick outer veneers of shaped sandstone resembling the masonry of the Mesa Verde region.



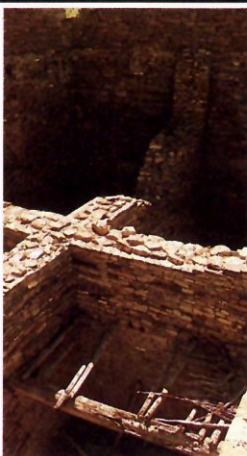
A Guide to Chaco Culture



Pueblo del Arroyo is a D-shaped great house that rose three and four stories high in the rear, stepping down to one

story in front. Abutting the rear wall is a tri-walled structure, one of a handful known in the Southwest. This feature was

built sometime after 1100, late in the pueblo's construction history.



This flooring in del Arroyo was carefully constructed of layers of beams, poles, sticks, bark, and adobe mud.



New Alto, on the north mesa, is a compact structure with rooms of uniform size around a central kiva. It was built in the early 1100s in a style

known as McElmo. The builders may have been influenced by architectural trends from the north.



Chacoan masons worked with precision and care, as these doors at Pueblo Bonito show.



Chetro Keti, one of the largest Chaco structures, flourished about 1050. Of interest are its "great kiva" and three elevated colon-

nade (later filled in during remodeling) along the rear wall suggests influences from Mexico. One extraordinary find here was a number of carved

wooden objects—birds, prayer sticks, arrows, and discs—which were probably used in ceremonies.



Casa Rinconada is one of the largest kivas in the Southwest. As with other kivas of this size and design, it is referred to as a

photo above by David Muench "great kiva." Built in the 1100s, it is located in the central area of the canyon and may have served communal needs.

Chaco's Ancient Architecture

The best way to see the sites is to go on a conducted walk with a ranger. For information on these tours and the evening campfire programs, inquire at the visitor center. Groups desiring special services should schedule them in advance with the superintendent.

Begin your sightseeing at the visitor center. The exhibits will help you understand Chaco and its people. Rangers will answer your questions and help you make the most of your time.

The ruin closest to the visitor center, **Una Vida**, is a short walk from the parking lot. It looks much as it did when Lt. James H. Simpson of the U.S. Army described it in 1849. Construction was underway by the middle of the 9th century and continued until late in the 11th century. There are about 150 rooms and five kivas in the structure.

The core of this Anasazi complex lies farther down the canyon. The largest of the great houses is **Pueblo Bonito**, which was occupied from the mid-800s to

about 1200. Built in stages, this pueblo in its final form was four stories high and contained some 600 rooms and 40 kivas. The pueblo was extensively studied at the turn of the century and again in the 1920s. It is considered the "type" site for the Classic Bonito phase (AD 1020 to 1120) of Chacoan culture.

Chetro Keti was begun about 1020. Completed in most respects by 1054, it was remodeled in the early 1100s. There are an estimated 500 rooms and 16 kivas here. The enclosed plaza is typical of great houses from this period.

Pueblo del Arroyo was built in stages over a relatively short time. The central part was started about 1075; north and south wings were added between 1101 and 1105; the plaza and the tri-walled structure were built around that same time as well. The building had about 280 rooms and more than 20 kivas.

Kin Kletso seems to have been built in two stages. The first one dates from about 1125, the second from

1130 or later. This pueblo had about 100 rooms and five enclosed kivas and may have risen three stories on the north side.

Casa Rinconada on the south side of the canyon is the largest known "Great Kiva" in the park. The trail leading to this ruin passes by several house sites contemporary with it and continues up the mesa to the great house **Tsin Kletsin**, with its panoramic view.

Hiking trails, as indicated on the map, lead to a number of other ruins. **Pueblo Alto**, on top of the mesa, is important as the junction of several prehistoric roads. **Tsin Kletsin** and **Peñasco Blanco** can be reached by hiking from the central canyon. **Wijiji**, built in a single stage in the early 1100s, is notable for its symmetrical layout and rooms of uniform size. Hiking permits are required for these trails and can be obtained at the visitor center.

About Your Visit

The park is located in northwestern New Mexico. From the north, turn off N. Mex. 44 at Nageezi and follow San Juan County road 7800 for 11 miles to N. Mex. 57. The visitor center is 15 miles ahead. From the south, turn north onto N. Mex. 371 from I-40 at Thoreau and go 44 miles on the paved road to Crownpoint. Two miles north of Crownpoint, turn right on Navajo 9. Continue east on Navajo 9 to a marked turn-off. From here a 20-mile stretch of unpaved road leads north to the visitor center. Inquire locally or call the park (505-786-7014) about road conditions. The 24-hour emergency number is 505-786-7060.

No lodging, gasoline, repair services, or food are available at the park. The nearest town is 60 miles away. On weekdays, staples can usually be purchased at trading posts on N. Mex. 44. The NPS operates a campground a mile from the visitor center. Tables, fireplaces, and central toilets are provided. Water is only available at the visitor center; no firewood is available in the park. Trailers over 30 feet long cannot be accommodated. Camping is limited to seven days.

To learn more about Chaco *Chaco Canyon: Archeology and Archeologists* (Albuquerque, 1981) by Robert H. Lister and Florence C. Lister is an account of the canyon's human habitation as revealed by a century of archeology work. For a technical account of recent archeology at the park, see Thomas C. Windes, *Investigations at the Pueblo Alto Complex*, Vol. 1, Publications in Archeology 18F, Chaco Canyon Studies (Santa Fe, 1987). Kendrick Frazier's *People of Chaco: A Canyon and Its Culture* summarizes Chacoan prehistory and its archeology for general readers.

Administration Chaco Culture National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, Star Route 4, Box 6500, Bloomfield, NM 87413.

Regulations The superintendent and his staff are here to help you understand and enjoy the park and to protect all prehistoric remains and the park's plant and animal life. The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979

prohibit the appropriation, injury, destruction, or removal of any object of antiquity, or the excavation, injury, or destruction of any ruin on federal land. Please leave all antiquities and broken bits of pottery where they lie. They may contribute to research and to the enjoyment of visitors who come after you.

